A TRIBUTE TO WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS

Sunday, April 29, 1990

BURROUGHS ON BOWERY (1978) by Marc Olmsted; 5 min, color, sound, 16mm.
ENERGY AND HOW TO GET IT (1981) by Robert Frank; 28 min, b&w, sound, 16mm.
THE DISCIPLINE OF DE (1978) by Gus Van Sant; 9 min, b&w, sound, 16mm.

TOWERS OPEN FIRE (1963) by Antony Balch; 10 min, b&w, sound, 16mm.
BILL AND TONY by Antony Balch; 6 min, color, sound, video.
WILLIAM BUYS A PARROT by Antony Balch; 2 min, color, silent, video.
THE CUT UPS by Antony Balch; 20 min, b&w, sound, video.
(The works by Antony Balch were produced in the period 1962-1972. Dates of individual works are unclear; they were films in their original form. Their availability on video is due to Mystic Fire Video.)

I first came upon the writings of William S. Burroughs through the writings of Jack Kerouac, and those through the liner notes from Tom Robinson's *TRB II* album. I hadn't connected with Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* as a teenager -- ah, the Chicago public school system -- so in my early twenties *On the Road*, *Desolation Angels*, and *The Town and the City* provided a valve for venting my pent-up rebellious male adolescent angst. There, in the background of Kerouac's novels and in the foreground of his biographies, lurked the sinister, shady, trenchcoated figure of William Seward Burroughs.

Can anyone's view of the world escape untainted from a reading of Burroughs' first published novel? *Naked Lunch* judiciously fills in the details of a Boschian hell-on-earth, recounting tale after tale of sexual perversity, aggressive medical malpractice, and inept attempts by the government to control its insect-eyed, paraffin-skinned, junk-sick citizens. The last book to be banned in Boston, it renders its shelfmates -- *Ulysses*, *Fanny Hill*, *Tropic of Cancer*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* -- prudish and repressed. When the Massachusetts Supreme Court lifted the censorship of *Naked Lunch* in 1965, it was a two-edged sword; recent swings in the pendulum notwithstanding, the possibilities for artistic expression and exploitative pornography were changed forever.

For me, Burroughs-the-writer has never matched *Naked Lunch*. Immediately after that text, he devoted himself to experiments with the cut-up technique, a Surrealist exercise developed with the late painter Brion Gysin. Text, any text, is sliced into strips and rearranged; though the results can produce hilarity and brilliant insight, they are equally likely to induce a tedious delirium. Eventually abandoning his use of the technique, Burroughs has devoted himself to exploring peripheral literary forms: science fiction and, most recently, the Western, with his trilogy *Cities of the Red Night*, *Place of Dead Roads*, and *Western Lands*.

However, Burroughs-the-personage continues to be a source of fascination. His nasal, contemptuous, measured voice, harrumpfing and thfunking down his nose, is as deadly a weapon as the shotguns he has brandished through the years. And his physical presence -- tall, reedy, wielding a cane, wearing three-piece suits of questionable fabric -- predictably turns all heads, commanding attention whether in person or on the movie screen (as in Gus Van Sant's *Drugstore Cowboy*).

In recognition of his presence as novelist and counter-culture hero, filmmaker Michael Wallin (*Decodings*) has assembled tonight's film tribute to the 76 year old Burroughs. The films and tapes on the program explore Burroughs' writings and methods, public image, and excursions into acting.

Burroughs aficionados will be most interested in two oft-discussed, but rarely seen films by Antony Balch: *Towers Open Fire* and *The Cut Ups*. Balch, a British filmmaker, traveled in the same circles (New York to Paris, London to Tangiers) as Burroughs, Gysin, and Ian Sommerville during the heyday of the cut up experiments. While the technique was a revolutionary and controversial form for producing text, Balch recognized it as an alternative form of montage, a different structure for making edits.

Towers Open Fire is the shorter and more narrative of the two films. The script is made up of Burroughs' texts, and he plays the film's central characters: narrator, chairman of the board, commando, junkie, man on the street. Amidst racist diatribes and cut up texts, the stock market crashes and aliens invade. Folded into the film are shots of Gysin's Dream Machines, flickering zoetrope-like sculptures that were designed to induce alpha waves in the viewer. The black and white footage, reportedly shot in 35mm, veers between exquisite naturalism and comic trickfilm gestures, and the soundtrack alternates between a harsh, driving composition and one with fife and drums.

Yes. Hello. Look at that picture. Does it seem to be persisting? How does it seem to you now? Good! Thank you. These phrases are central to the soundtrack of *The Cut Ups*. Apparently shot at the same time as *Towers Open Fire*, the film dismisses narrative in favor of cyclical montage. Footage of New York and Paris streets -- the Horn and Hardart Automat near Times Square, the Hotel Chelsea, the Beat Hotel -- is combined with Brion Gysin painting, a less-than-chaste doctor's examination, and various cafe scenes. Although the film functions on one level as a ripe time capsule, it also, through its concerns with phase and repetition, has a surprisingly contemporary feel.

Gus Van Sant's interest in Burroughs goes back at least as far as 1978, when he made a low budget adaptation of the *Rolling Stone* piece, "The Discipline of DE." The film tells the story of one retired Colonel Sutton-Smith who, in the course of writing his memoirs, discovers the simple and basic discipline of DO EASY; a way of doing everything in the easiest, most relaxed, quickest, and most efficient way. *The Discipline of DE* faithfully excerpts about two-thirds of Burroughs' story; the trims, combined with snappy edits and more trickfilm gestures, result in a delightful film.

Robert Frank's *Energy and How to Get It* is a natural choice for this program. Burroughs is in the film physically and philosophically; he has a minor role as the Energy Czar and, more importantly, Frank, Rudy Wurlitzer, and Gary Hill draw from his vision in this subjective documentary on electronics experimenter Robert Golka. Golka may or may not have the solution to the energy crisis; he clearly has something capable of manipulating high voltages, but the fictional Energy Czar and a very real police force combine to thwart this renegade genius. With appearances by John Giorno and Robert Downey, music by Dr. John and Libby Titus.

Also on the program: *Burroughs on Bowery* by Marc Olmsted and two other Balch films (on video): *Bill and Tony* and *William Buys a Parrot*. Olmsted mixes super-8 footage of Burroughs with rephotographed images of gangster movies and Japanese science fiction films. While the found footage is sufficiently campy and the process yields and interesting palette of steely blues and fiery oranges, the film suffers from being on the same program as *The Cut Ups*, which addresses similar concerns with greater sophistication. In *Bill and Tony*, Burroughs and Balch permute voices as they recite texts; Burroughs' facial gestures, pursing his lips after delivering each line, is the film's most noteworthy contribution. And *William Buys a Parrot* is an odd fragment featuring a dapper Burroughs entering a doorway for oceanside cocktails with a cockatoo; harmless at a minute and a half.

--notes by E. S. Theise